

Fonthill (Henry Chapman
Mercer House)
northwest side of East Court Street,
0.1 mile southwest of State Route 313
Doylestown vicinity
Bucks County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1140

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

FONTHILL
(HENRY CHAPMAN MERCER HOUSE)

HABS No. PA-1140

Location: Northwest side of East Court Street, 0.1 mile southwest of State Route 313, Doylestown vicinity, Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Present Use: Museum, operated by the Bucks County Historical Society.

Significance: A pioneering example of the use of reinforced concrete in a residence. Exhibiting an eclectic mixture of Medieval, Elizabethan, and Jacobean motifs, the house was designed by antiquarian and inventor, Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930), as his residence. Many of the tiles which decorate the house were manufactured at Mercer's famous Moravian Pottery and Tile Works.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of construction: 1907-1912.
2. Architect: Henry Chapman Mercer.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Henry Mercer acquired the property in 1907. Under the terms of his will (Will Book 54, Page 44 ff), the house was left in trust to the public as a "museum for the exhibition and study of Decorative Tiles and Decorative Art of Engraving and Woodcuts and of the technical and artistic processes of concrete house construction."

B. Historical Context:

Henry A. Mercer, architect, antiquarian and inventor, began to design Fonthill in the winter of 1907. He later recorded that he designed the interior of the house first, thus forcing the exterior to conform to the interior spatial needs. This approach explains the highly irregular massing of the finished structure. In designing the house, Mercer sought inspiration from buildings he had seen in his extensive travels and from several works of art, including: "The Dutch Housekeeper" by Gerard Dow; "The Great Barn" by Wouvermans; "Le Main Chaud" by De Boucourt; and "A Stable for Nightmares" which illustrated the story "Haunted" in Tinsley's Magazine (ca. 1865). Mercer admitted, however, that in addition to such sources, he drew heavily upon his own imagination.

Desiring to create a fireproof building, Mercer elected to use reinforced concrete as his basic building material. This extensive use of reinforced concrete in a residence was unprecedented. The uniqueness of the structure is further enhanced by the use of clay tiles manufactured at Mercer's own pottery works. A collector and student of tile and pottery, Mercer had developed in 1899 a method of duplicating early Moravian Pottery. He established the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, which became a famous crafts manufactory and which supplied the tiles for the construction of Fonthill.

The name, Fonthill, was taken from the name of a house in Essex County, Virginia, which was owned by a distant relative of Mercer's, R.M.T. Hunter. Mercer liked the name and thought it particularly appropriate for his house, which he situated close to a spring on a small hilltop.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Highly irregular in massing, the house is an eclectic combination of Medieval, Elizabethan and Jacobean styles. Both interior and exterior are highly personal statements by the designer and combined to form a highly unusual structure.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two-and-a-half-story and three-and-a-half-story sections and four-and-a-half-story tower with raised basement. Irregular plan, approximately 100' x 50'.
2. Foundations: Reinforced concrete with finish coat of cement plaster.
3. Walls: Reinforced concrete with finish coat of cement plaster.
4. Structural system, framing: Reinforced concrete vaults and columns.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: Three concrete balconies on the southeast facade; concrete terrace and steps at southwest corner; two balconies on northwest facade.
6. Chimneys: Approximately 16 concrete chimneys, variously rectangular, octagonal and round.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Rectangular, round-arched and gothic-arched entrances with wooden doors of vertical boards.
- b. Windows: Fenestration highly irregular. Rectangular, round-arched and triangular-arched windows. Some wooden double-hung sashes, others casements. Some with concrete muntins.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A juxtaposition of sloping roof surfaces, generally steeply pitched hipped roofs, covered with brushed concrete. The concave mansard roof of the southwest tower and several small pent and pyramidal roofs are covered with Spanish tiles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Concrete moulded to double fillets above and below an ovolo.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: Several concrete towers, with largest on southwest. Mostly gabled concrete dormers, with one concrete barrell vault dormer on north.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Thirty-three rooms and thirty-six alcoves.
2. Flooring: Generally hexagonal tiles.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Concrete.
4. Decorative features and trim: Extensive use of decorative tiles on vaults, columns, ceilings, fireplaces, etc.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Set on a northeast-southwest orientation.
2. Outbuildings: There is a garage nearby, which was designed in the same basic style as the main house. The garage is of reinforced concrete, with the dormers designed to serve as bird houses or dove cotes. There is also a small spring house, constructed of concrete with a pyramidal tile roof. Another secondary building is an 18th century farmhouse, which was moved to the site and used as an arboretum.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early views: Several early photographs in collection of the Bucks County Historical Society.

B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

"Fonthill," National Register of Historic Places Nomination, prepared by the Pennsylvania Register of Historic Sites and Landmarks, 1972.

"The Building of 'Fonthill' at Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in 1908, 1909 and 1910," A Collection of Papers Read Before the Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown: Bucks County Historical Society, 1932, pp. 321-330.

G. F. Wendall, "Bucks County Historical Society Museum," Architectural Concrete, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 28-31.

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